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ABSTRACT

Family Friends is a program that matches senior volunteers with families of chronically ill or disabled children. Rural Family Friends, which is an outgrowth of Family Friends, focuses on rural families in distress. Rural Family Friends has established pilot programs in Arkansas, Georgia, New Hampshire, North Carolina, and West Virginia. The senior volunteer may serve as a source of information to the family; a role model to the children and a parent model to the parents; a source of stability for the family; and a teacher of basic life skills. Each local program has: (1) a project director, who is a trained professional with experience with at-risk families; (2) an advisory committee of community leaders, professionals, and specialists; (3) volunteers who are 55 years of age or older; and (4) the participating children and families. Establishing a Rural Family Friends program involves recruiting, training, and supervising volunteers; selecting families to participate in the program; matching volunteers with families and scheduling visits of volunteers to families; fundraising; and promoting and evaluating the program. (BC)

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Rural Family Friends

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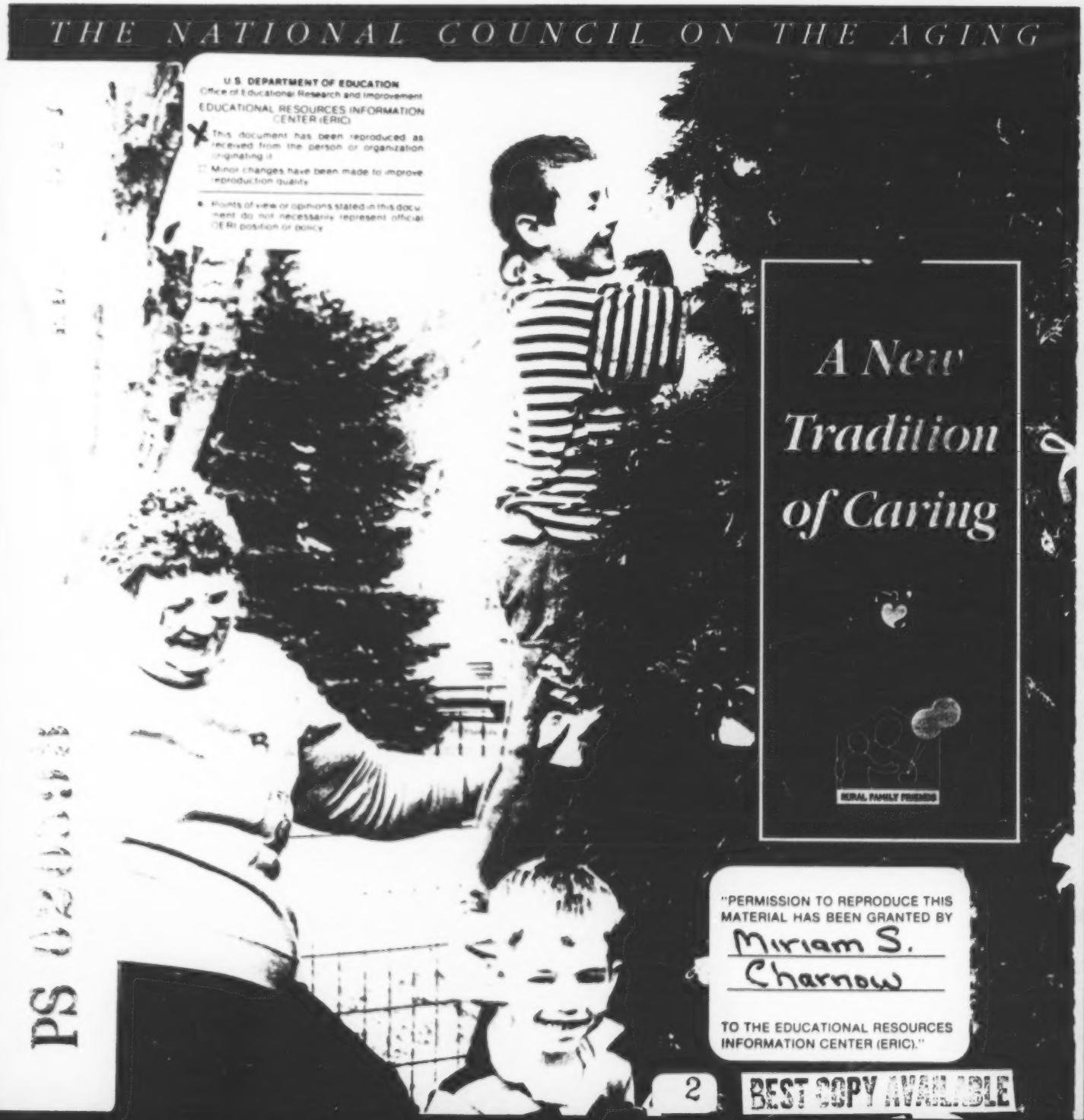

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Rural Family Friends

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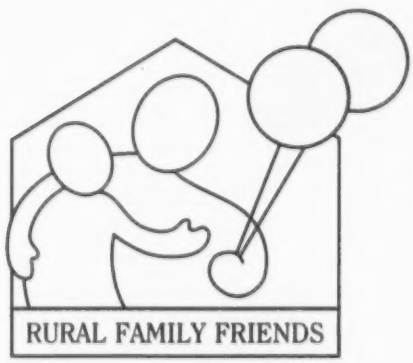
A New Tradition of Caring



A New Tradition of Caring

Within two months, Rural Family Friend Jane Hall has gone from being a stranger who came by every weekend, to being a welcome and trusted visitor for Jeremy, twins Trevor and Adrienne, and their mother, Denise. Jane comes by and stays for a couple of hours, often reading to Jeremy. He benefits greatly from having someone else to talk to. Denise is learning better organizational skills from Jane, and Jane is helping her find more suitable housing.

In rural communities across the nation, from the red clay of Georgia's countryside to the rugged climate of New Hampshire — even to a remote Indian reservation in North Carolina, a program called "Rural Family Friends" is enrolling older volunteers, who have the wisdom and nurturing skills that come with age, to help families in distress.

Through national sponsorship by The National Council on the Aging (NCOA) and Save the Children Federation (SCF), the Rural Family Friends program strengthens families in distress by working with them in the basics of everyday living. These volunteers help mothers learn more about community services, while developing warm relationships with family and older people in their neighborhood.

The typical Rural Family Friend is over 55, a parent, and often a grandparent. Rural Family Friends come from many walks of life and educational levels. Usually they

have fewer demands on their time than younger persons. Many have already raised their own families and remember those warm, loving, often difficult times fondly.

"It was a rude awakening for me to see such problems right in my home town," says Pat Russell, Director of the Rural Family Friends program in Keene, New Hampshire. "We try to help any family that's in crisis. It doesn't matter what their income is ... we want to help."

Most Rural Family Friends have lived in the same community their entire lives. Typically, that community is isolated from bustling urban areas, either by distance or by harsh geography. Lack of public transportation is a problem. The families helped by Rural Family Friends live on farms, in towns, in housing projects, in single family homes, or in apartments. Their median income is low; many barely subsist on welfare checks or entitlement programs.

Families helped by Rural Family Friends are often headed by a single parent, usually female, who keeps herself and her children alive on a modest, and sometimes meager, household budget. Many of these mothers are young, even teenaged. Some have grown up in an environment of abuse, both physical and sexual. These families need basic help in everyday living, from parenting skills to housekeeping tips, nutritional information, pointers on health care and hygiene, emotional support, financial assistance, and — above all — friendship.

The Rural Family Friends program benefits everyone it touches.

- **Families in distress** receive social and emotional support from an older person who has already raised a family and can speak out in their behalf. They also come to recognize their own strength and uniqueness as a family.

• **Volunteers** aged 55 and over help and nurture those who need it and are, in turn, rewarded with a warm feeling of personal pride and genuine affection for their "new families."

• **The community** is strengthened as families helped by the volunteers grow stronger and stay together. Families in distress learn to rely on the Family Friend as their "extended family." "It certainly helps to have someone around to talk to," said one mother.

• **Organizations that support Rural Family Friends** increase their visibility in the community. As more and more people — volunteers and parents alike — become involved with Rural Family Friends, they learn about those community-based nonprofit organizations.

Every person involved in this trigenerational program gives and receives friendship in many different ways — at a time in life when each one needs it.

• **The Rural Family Friend helps the entire family**. At times the volunteer is called upon to be a "parent model" for parents who may still be children themselves or who were raised in a distressed family.

• **Poverty and lack of education** place undue stress on many families; these are the people helped by Rural Family Friends.

• **In many cases the family structure is weak**, and the Rural Family Friend is needed to provide stability for parents and children. Through example, the Rural Family Friend becomes a teacher of basic life skills.

• **Because the rural community is usually tightly knit,** most of the volunteers already know the family with whom they are matched.

• **Geography plays an important role** in the program, because rural areas often make it necessary for Rural Family Friends to travel long distances. Usually no public transportation is available.

My Rural Family Friend is one of the greatest and most special people I ever met.

In March 1989, First Lady Barbara Bush praised the work of Family Friends, calling it an exceptional private sector volunteer program. She gave national recognition to this volunteer work during a White House reception when the families, volunteers, children, and community supporters met with her.

BACKGROUND OF RURAL FAMILY FRIENDS

The Rural Family Friends program is an outgrowth of NCOA's Family Friends program, which began in 1986 to match volunteers with families of chronically ill or disabled children. The original Family Friends program was funded by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a philanthropical organization devoted to improving the nation's health care.

In 1990, Family Friends began to help another at-risk group, the rural poor. In contrast to the original program, which focused on the chronically ill or disabled child, Rural Family Friends focuses on entire families in distress. Children from low-income, single-parent families are frequently handicapped by their lack of necessary life skills.

Under the Rural Family Friends umbrella, pilot programs were established with funds provided by the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, Public Welfare Foundation, Pioneer Hi-Bred International, C&P Telephone Company of West Virginia, Save the Children Federation, and Pew Charitable Trusts. Volunteers are trained to provide educational, social, and psychological support to parents and children in Arkansas, Georgia, New Hampshire, North Carolina, and West Virginia.

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WHAT A RURAL FAMILY FRIEND IS

A Rural Family Friend is an older person — listener, talker, storyteller, teacher, mentor, caregiver. A Rural Family Friend is — at various times — supportive, objective, optimistic, curious, informative, helpful, cheerful, or sad. A Rural Family Friend is there when someone needs a shoulder to lean on.

"I think my Rural Family Friend is one of the greatest and most special people I have ever met," says the teenage mother of a six-month-old. "Thanks for bringing her into my home."

A Rural Family Friend becomes a grandparent to the children and parents. Older people have their own unique wealth of experience to share with a family who welcomes them. They enjoy helping the families with whom they are matched, and they feel better for the part they play in making Rural Family Friends such a successful program. One volunteer said it this way:

"The project has made my life brighter and happier. Children are a blessing — a reason to be your best and do your best."

Rural Family Friend Greta has been matched with a family headed by Beth, a young divorced mother of three children — aged five, seven, and eight. Greta noticed how shy the youngsters were during her initial visits. She soon learned the family's history of spouse abuse — with threats still continuing, at times in the presence of the children. Slowly, Greta has gained their trust, so now they greet her with shouts and hugs. She's also become an ally to Beth, accompanying her to school for teachers' meetings and helping her become strong for her children.

Children are a blessing. A reason to be your best and do your best.

WHAT A RURAL FAMILY FRIEND DOES

Rural Family Friends work as much with an entire family as they do with the child. Depending on the family's particular situation, a Rural Family Friend reads aloud to the children, plays games, draws or paints, listens to music, sews with the family — and even helps the mother learn to budget her household funds. A Family Friend takes the children for a walk, goes grocery shopping with the family, helps the mother complete an application for needed benefits, offers respite to a mother who needs some time for herself, and helps the children with their homework.

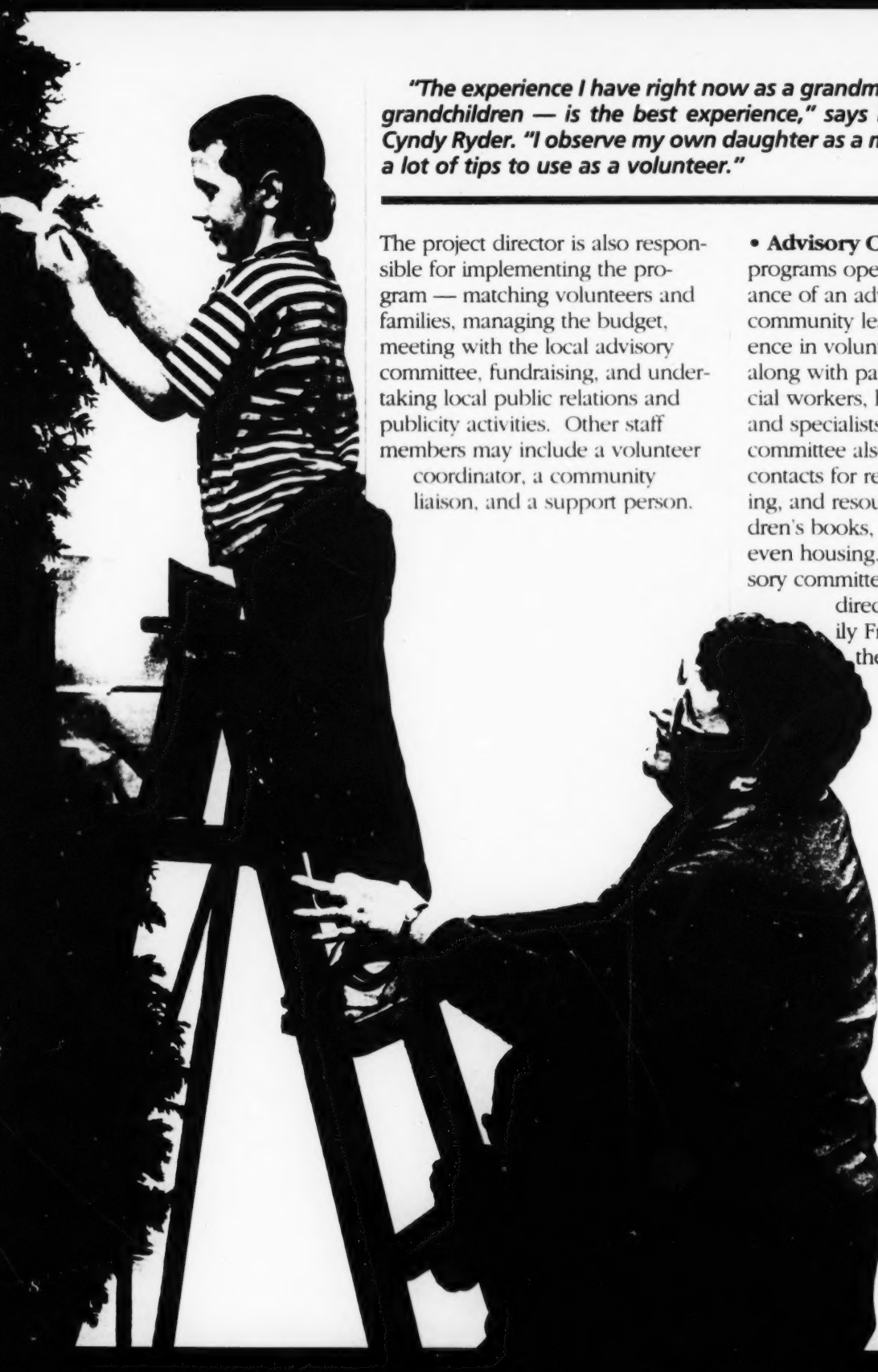
Parents are grateful when a Rural Family Friend talks to and plays with their children and helps them grow up. For example, two single parents in West Virginia said how pleased they were to see their volunteers help their kids overcome shyness.

In short, Rural Family Friends do what all good friends do — they're there and they care.

HOW THE PROGRAM OPERATES

Rural Family Friends projects are currently operating in Gurdon, Arkansas; Cedartown, Georgia; Keene, New Hampshire; Cherokee, North Carolina; and in Huntington, West Virginia.

• **Project Director.** Each local program is run by a trained professional who has experience with families in distress. The project director recruits and supervises the volunteers, who are asked to make an initial nine-month commitment to the program. Rural Family Friends receive stipends to cover expenses such as supplies, meals, and transportation costs.



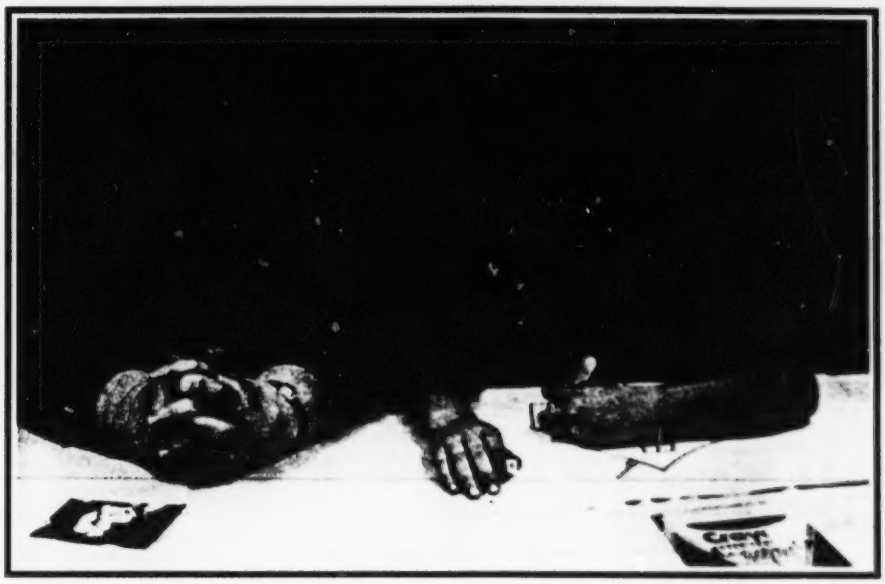
"The experience I have right now as a grandmother — I have two grandchildren — is the best experience," says Rural Family Friend Cyndy Ryder. "I observe my own daughter as a mother and I pick up a lot of tips to use as a volunteer."

The project director is also responsible for implementing the program — matching volunteers and families, managing the budget, meeting with the local advisory committee, fundraising, and undertaking local public relations and publicity activities. Other staff members may include a volunteer coordinator, a community liaison, and a support person.

• **Advisory Committee.** Local programs operate with the guidance of an advisory committee of community leaders with experience in voluntary fundraising — along with parents, educators, social workers, health professionals, and specialists on aging. This committee also provides personal contacts for recruitment, fundraising, and resources — such as children's books, toys, jobs, food, and even housing. An interested advisory committee helps the project director get a Rural Family Friends program off the ground quickly and effectively.

• **Volunteers.** The Rural Family Friends program looks for volunteers who are mature (at least 55 years of age), experienced, emotionally stable, and energetic. A typical volunteer is either still working or retired from teaching, homemaking, nursing, fiscal management, or a number of other professions. Most of them are parents, and many are grandparents.

• **Children and families.** The children range in age from birth to twelve years. Often they are referred to the program through Head Start, a health care organization, or a civic association.



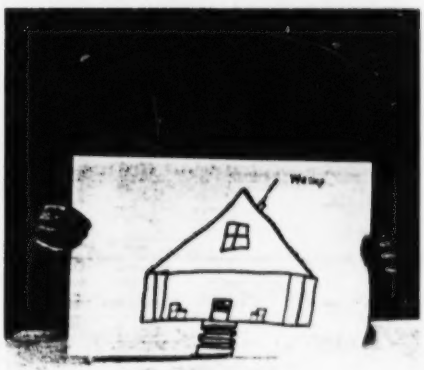
ESTABLISHING A RURAL FAMILY FRIENDS PROGRAM

If you or your organization wants to start a Rural Family Friends program, here are the basic components.

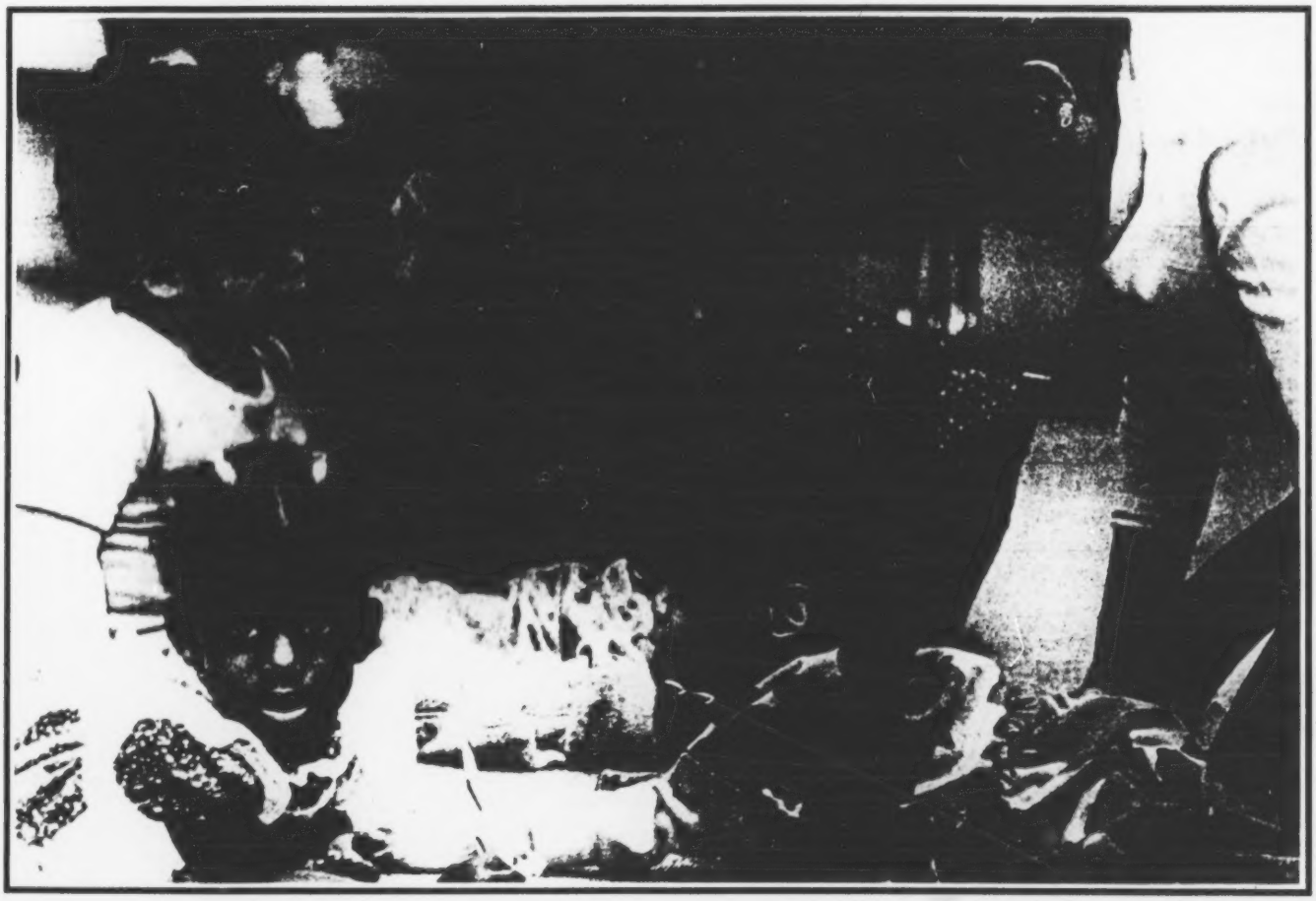
• **Recruiting volunteers** starts with the personal touch: one-on-one recruitment, a volunteer nominating a friend or relative. Often volunteers are found by personal contact, publicizing the program through brochures, fliers, newspaper articles, senior center newsletters, church or synagogue bulletins, personal appearances at seniors' clubs and housing locations, and word of mouth.

Recruitment also includes an hour-long interview covering personal and employment history, relationship with other family members, involvement in other organizations, personal interests, motivations for becoming a Rural Family Friend, and general morale and outlook on life. Later, physical examinations screen for communicable diseases or problems that would limit volunteer participation in the program. Persons interviewed who may not meet the physical requirements are referred to other programs.

There's really nothing more effective, though, than one Rural Family Friend telling relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances about the program. Close community relationships are vital in recruiting successful volunteers.



Volunteers receive recognition in a special ceremony each May, during Volunteer Month. In addition, many programs sponsor a holiday party during the winter and a spring or summer picnic or outing for the families and the volunteers.



• **Selecting families** includes an interview process. Like the volunteers, parents are interviewed about medical histories, current educational and health care services used, family needs and resources, and specific areas in which the Rural Family Friend can be most helpful. At the same time, the staff member evaluates the family's situation to ensure the best volunteer match possible.

• **Training volunteers** is the responsibility of NCOA and local program staff with the help of faculty from area colleges and universities, social work agencies, and aging organizations. The training emphasizes family dynamics, early childhood development, child abuse, and communications skills. Volunteers learn about community resources available to distressed families. They may also find some of these resources useful for themselves.

A 20-hour initial training program helps volunteers understand their important role in the Rural Family Friends program. Frequently, two formal training segments are separated by two or three months, to total the 60-hour requirement. This allows the volunteers to meet and work with their families for a brief period, with follow-up to answer questions that may have arisen.

The volunteers meet regularly, sometimes as often as weekly, with Rural Family Friends staff members to discuss their reactions to the family. These sessions evolve into a necessary and valuable support group for volunteers.

The young and the aging need to know they are wanted.

• **Matching volunteers and families** is done carefully to find the best mix possible. Friends and families are matched according to the interview information. Taken into consideration are the volunteer's ability to travel to and from the family's home, proximity, personal styles and needs, any handicaps or special health conditions of the volunteer, schedules, language barriers, and personalities.

• **Visits** are scheduled for times that are mutually convenient. Each visit lasts from one to two hours, with at least one visit per week. Most of the children are enrolled in an educational program during the day, so Rural Family Friends often visit in the late afternoon, early evening, or on weekends. Some volunteers also visit the school classroom to help children with schoolwork.

• **Supervising volunteers** takes place especially during the monthly meetings, when small groups of volunteers discuss their experiences and exchange ideas and advice. In addition, each Rural Family Friend meets regularly with a staff member to resolve any special situations that may have come up.

• **Fundraising** is the key to continuing success for every Rural Family Friends program. "How-to" help in fundraising is available from NCOA. Actual fundraising takes place at the local level, where the community can see for itself the beneficial effects of a Rural Family Friends program.

Local funding comes from a combination of sources, such as private foundations, family corporations, local businesses, state and county social agencies, and individuals. Often funds are also raised through community events such as fairs, luncheons, potluck dinners, direct mail, and personal contact.

Community support and fundraising come through personal networking, advocacy, and public education. A fundraising advisory committee may be made up of people with previous experience in volunteer or professional fundraising. This committee expands community support and helps identify potential sources of cash and human capital. The major consideration in choosing committee members is their ability to design, launch, maintain, and nurture the program.

Most volunteers report feeling better about themselves as a result of Rural Family Friends. They've learned to appreciate their own ability to help others. They say their work with the program is more meaningful than any other volunteer work they have done before. "I'm proud to be a volunteer. The young and the aging need to know they are wanted," said one Rural Family Friend.

Help is also sought from leaders of community-based organizations with an interest in at-risk families and children, and from organizations that may be sources of recruitment of older volunteers. Co-sponsorship with another organization is effective because it expands the resources and constituencies available to the program.

A letter-writing advocacy campaign to elected officials alerts them to the cost-effective benefits of Rural Family Friends and doubles as a fundraising activity.

• **Promoting the program** consists of carrying out a public relations campaign to publicize the project, raise funds, and help recruit families and volunteers. A publicity campaign increases the public's awareness of the program and its benefit to the community. The public relations campaign is also an important arm of the fundraising activities.

The campaign — as simple or complex as resources allow — might include an informational brochure; press release; public service announcement; human interest story for the local newspaper; article for the newsletters of community-based organizations, churches, synagogues, and public interest organizations; personal appearances to groups of potential volunteers; special events to attract media attention; and participation in special community events for older adults.

• **Evaluating the program** allows the staff and advisory committee to identify strengths and areas for future improvement. Evaluations are based on reactions from volunteers and families regarding all aspects of the program. Results are cycled back into the planning process to help make such decisions as whether to continue the project, expand it, or change the approach.

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The project has made my life brighter and happier.

HELP AVAILABLE FROM NCOA

NCOA's Rural Family Friends Resource Center offers materials and technical assistance each step of the way to help establish and expand your program. We can work with you on volunteer training, staff development, program planning, fundraising, and all other aspects of developing a successful program. We offer on-site consulting services to help you establish a successful Rural Family Friends project in your community. You may call to get assistance or to discuss specific, on-site, extensive consultation.

Rural Family Friends play an important role

Older volunteers help break down isolation, build community leadership, and draw on their own life experience. In the words of Arkansas Project Director Delores Hodge:

"I think it's one of the most wonderful things that can happen. I just retired, after 30 years of teaching, and I think a program of this magnitude gives seniors the chance to become more involved with the community, where they can play a great role in shaping children's lives."

If you would like to set up a Rural Family Friends project in your community, call or write:
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RURAL FAMILY FRIENDS

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL ON THE AGING, INC., established in 1950, is the national organization for professionals and volunteers who work to improve the quality of life for older Americans. Intergenerational programming has been a major focus at NCOA. It enhances the understanding of how Americans of all ages can work together to help bring some relief to families facing formidable responsibilities. NCOA also serves as a national resource for information, training, technical assistance, advocacy, and research on every aspect of aging.

SAVE THE CHILDREN FEDERATION began its work in 1932, in the depths of the Depression, when it brought hot lunches to isolated one-room schools for children of unemployed coal miners in Kentucky and Tennessee. Today, Save the Children serves youngsters and families throughout the United States and in 38 countries worldwide. Its goal remains the same — to help children. But its emphasis has shifted from soliciting charitable handouts to providing opportunities for families and communities to help themselves.

As a collaborative effort between the two organizations, Rural Family Friends began in 1990 with funding earmarked for a pilot program in West Virginia. Rural Family Friends projects now operate in many locations.

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Since 1950 working to improve the lives of older Americans

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